

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by persistent challenges in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, including challenges with social reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviours used for social interaction, and skills in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships. In addition to the social communication challenges, the diagnosis of ASD requires the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities. Asperger's Syndrome, High Functioning Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorder all fall under this "spectrum disorder". In recent years there has been a steady increase in students with ASD registered with the Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL), consistent with the recent finding that Ottawa has the highest concentration of post-secondary students with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Ontarioⁱ.

For students with ASD, post-secondary education may present personal, social and academic challenges. Unconventional understanding and use of language, as well as difficulty interpreting and displaying nonverbal cues can lead to difficulties both inside and outside of classes. Social interaction during group work, presentations, and lectures may be especially challenging. Students with ASD may have problems managing courses unrelated to their interests and integrating their areas of focus into course expectations. This applies to completing tests and assignments, as well as interactions with classmates and teaching staff. In addition, many students with ASD struggle with organization, study habits, writing and presentation skills.ⁱⁱ

The transition to post-secondary education itself is often a major challenge for students with ASD as it involves entering a novel environment with new routines, reduced structure and variable schedules. These challenges come with increased academic and social demands and with a greater expectation of independence in life skills and increased self-advocacy skills. Many students with ASD also are challenged with comorbid disorders such as anxiety, depression, ADHD and a non-verbal learning disability. One characteristic of people with ASD is a "heightened attention to detail that contrasts somewhat with the usual focusing on the gist or "wider picture". Their restricted focus, coupled with a good rote memory, may result in their having a thorough detailed knowledge base related to their main interests.

Suggestions for Faculty

- Provide a detailed course syllabus (with deadlines) and adhere to it as closely as possible.
- Provide advance notice of schedule/room changes.
- Teach using multiple visual supports - graphs, lists, pictures, film, PowerPoint, etc.
- Break down tasks/assignments into manageable chunks; offer students examples of exactly what you are looking for.
- Encourage students to ask questions of clarification and rehearse instructions as needed.
- Provide specific and concrete feedback.
- Address behavioural concerns after class with the student and reinforce with clear expectations.
- If there are areas of concern, consult with Disabilities Counsellor.

Communication Tips for Working with Students with ASD

- **Do not make assumptions** - we tend to assume people know certain things. We might see some things as "common sense". It is best not to make any assumptions about what the student knows and always provide clear steps or instructions. If in doubt, check that the student is clear about what has been asked of them.
- **Try to avoid using sarcasm, irony and metaphors** - for example, "It'll cost you an arm and leg" or "I could have died from laughter".
- **Avoid using other forms of figurative speech** - people with ASD may take things literally, so it is best not to use figurative speech. For example, if you say you will be "back in a minute" the student may fully expect you to be back in one minute.
- **Be direct** - people with ASD usually prefer direct questions or instructions. Asking for something in an indirect manner usually involves more ambiguous language, which can be misinterpreted - for example "How big is your class?" may give you a response about the actual classroom size, when you were asking about the number of students in the class.
- **Be precise** - when giving instructions or explanations it is best to be precise and say specifically what is required. For example, saying "make three copies of this and give the copies to John, Dave and Erin" rather than "make sure everyone gets a copy of this".
- **Don't be patronizing** - people with ASD generally have an average or above average IQ.
- **Check that you have been understood** - if you feel that there may be any confusion, always check that the student has understood the comment or instruction. If arrangements are left vague, don't be surprised if things don't get done.
- **Write it down** - it often helps to back up verbal instructions with written ones. Flow charts, mind maps or bullet points may be useful, depending on the student's individual preference.
- **Follow the six second rule** - after asking a question, allow for up to six seconds for the student to respond. Although this seems like a long time, it can take some people with ASD this long to process a question and develop a response. If a question still elicits no response, try to rephrase it.

ASD Links:

- Short video for Instructors: "Understanding Asperger's Syndrome: A College Professor's Guide": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=233-3itEZck>
- Autism Ontario: Ottawa Chapter: <http://www.autismontario.com/Ottawa>

ⁱ MacKay, Susan Alcorn. "Identifying trends and supports for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder transitioning into postsecondary: Report to Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario". Northern Ontario Assessment and Resource Centre, Cambrian College of Applied Arts and Technology. September 2009. Print.

ⁱⁱ Stoddard, K.P., Burke, L., Muskat, B., Manett, J., Duhaime, S., Accardo, C., Burnham Riosa, P. & Bradley, E. (2013). Diversity in Ontario's Youth and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Complex Needs in Unprepared Systems. Toronto, ON: The Repath Centre